

Familiarity breeds empathy

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The more time we spend with people from another nationality the more empathy we have for them, University of Queensland research has found.

UQ's School of Psychology and Queensland Brain Institute Associate Professor Ross Cunnington examined whether people's brains responded to people of other races differently following an increase in contact with that race.

"Research over the past decade has shown the brain has a very strong

[racial bias](#) in response to seeing others in pain or suffering," Dr Cunningham said.

"As a result, we have much stronger biologically-driven [empathy](#) towards people of our own race.

"However, our study has shown that the level of empathy in the brain increases the more a person spends time with other races."

Professor Cunningham said empathy depended partly on cerebral processes that led people to automatically mirror or share the emotions of others.

The study involved Chinese students who had recently arrived in Brisbane, who recorded the level of contact they had with people of other nationalities.

The students were shown videos of Chinese and Caucasian actors receiving a painful or non-painful touch to their cheek.

Researchers used brain imaging techniques to record the level of neural empathy in the brains the students as they viewed each video clip.

"We found those who reported more contact with other races since their arrival showed higher levels of neural empathy compared to those who had less contact," Dr Cunningham said.

"This did not depend upon the closeness of contact or personal relationships, but simply the overall level of experience with other-race people in everyday life.

"The response of the [brain](#) that leads us to feel distress or intervene when others are suffering adapts to give the strongest response towards people

we typically see around us in our everyday environment."

Dr Cunningham said the findings were positive for Australia's multicultural society and could help new immigrants in connecting with others.

The study, "Racial bias in neural responses to others' pain is reduced with other-race contact," is published in the journal *Cortex*.

More information: "Racial bias in neural response to others' pain is reduced with other-race contact," *Cortex*, Available online 4 March 2015, ISSN 0010-9452, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2015.02.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2015.02.010)

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